

LI-WAN'S REVENGE

**A "Halloween" Ghost Story
From the Land of Qua-lun**



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Peony detail
Chosui Yabu, "Peony Branch", 1861

This story is part of the forthcoming Sa'adani Tales short story collection of folklore. It also appears in the novel Dragonsword, available free online at <http://www.dragonsword.info>.

"Halloween" in Qua-lun: The Day of Return

In my novel *Dragonsword*, an Asian-inspired heroic samurai adventure, there is a holiday called The Day of Return. This day marks the fall equinox and the turning of the seasons. At this time the veil between worlds is thin, and ghosts and other disincarnate entities may come through to visit the land of the living. The day itself is loosely analogous to our All Saint's Day or Dia de los Muertos, and the night before – the Night of Return – could be likened to Halloween.

In the land of Qua-lun, however, ghosts are very real. This is a time of year when the favor of departed spirits is curried, and reasonable people are on guard against the predations of unhappy spirits.

As our own Halloween approaches, I thought it would be fun to share this Qualuni version of a ghost story told during this holiday season. "Li-Wan's Revenge" appears in the book *Dragonsword*, where this tale is told by a wizard to a group of children on the occasion of the Day of Return festival. If you'd like to sample more of this world, you can download a copy of the fantasy novel for free at www.dragonsword.info.

LI-WAN'S REVENGE

A young woman named Li-Wan was the daughter of a good family in a small village. She was light of mind and heart, for nothing in this world was a burden to her. When her parents informed her she was to marry, she was glad and wanted to ask her ancestors' blessings. But first, she decided to adorn the ancestor shrine with peonies plucked at a nearby stream.

Although she took an untraveled path through meadows, a strange person caught up with the girl along the way. He was short, with beady, gleaming black eyes and took curious darting steps as he fidgeted with his hands. Li-Wan thought he was a peddler by the pack on his back and cudgel that he carried. But she had never paid attention during her studies, and didn't notice all the tell-tale signs: the little man was a hengeyokai, a shape-shifter whose natural form was that of a rat. By this



she would have known that his intentions could only be evil. But Li-Wan was ignorant, and spoke kindly to him as they traveled.

He offered to help her pick flowers. Sadly for her, she agreed, and by the riverbank the rat-person abused her then killed her. When her body was found there was no clue

to the identity of her killer, and there were no local wizards or monks skilled enough to learn the tale from the plants and stones that witnessed the event. Her death went unavenged.

The rat hengeyokai, who went by the human name Ruoi, journeyed on to Li-Wan's village. He laughed to himself when her funeral procession passed by, and noted the fineness of her parents' clothes when they walked past. "One day I'll rob them," Ruoi promised himself. Soon he opened a sake shop, which quickly became a gathering place for yakuza - thugs and organized thieves who extorted protection money from villagers and ran gambling dens. Honest villagers avoided it.

Meanwhile, in the house of Li-Wan's parents, those good people set up offerings to the ghost of their murdered daughter. Her first spirit, the animus, had been laid to rest with the funeral, and the third spirit, her soul, was already bound for rebirth on the Wheel of Life

in heaven. But they feared her second spirit, the ancestral personality, would be restless, and that might cause great danger for the living. They tried to entice Li-Wan to the ancestor shrine and bind her ghost there, but their offerings remained untouched, and the spirit chime never rang in response to their pleas. They knew they had failed and then they were afraid, for a murdered girl often comes back as a kuei, an angry ghost seeking revenge.

As they feared, the serving girl suddenly collapsed. They carried her to her bed, where she tossed and turned, and cried out in a strange voice. Clearly, a spirit had possessed her and was trying to use the girl's resisting body to speak.

Li-Wan's parents called a priest from the temple. He came and immediately began an exorcism. He burned incense and chanted all night. He filled little smudgepots with herbs and, setting them alight, placed them on the energy points of the servant's body, at

wrists and chest and belly.

As the girl's skin heated beneath the smudgepots, the balance of her vital energies changed. A wail was heard and with a single great convulsion, the kuei was driven forth from her body.

Well! That satisfied Li-Wan's parents, but the ghost of the girl was even more distressed. She had only tried to speak through the servants' body to tell her parents the name of her murderer, and that he was now living in their village. If the priest had thought to bring a medium with him, that woman could have



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channeled the voice of the vengeful ghost, and shared her knowledge. But the hasty work of the exorcist prevented Li-Wan from telling that news. The ghost was not yet to have her rest.

So the murdered girl drifted through the village to Ruoi's sake shop. There, yakuza thugs drank heavily and laughed over their dice games. Then an idea came to Li-Wan. The kuei lay in wait out back by the privy, and when one of the drunken thugs came to relieve himself, the ghost possessed him. Because he was drunk, it was remarkably easy to take possession of his body. Soon, Li-Wan looked down at herself from within the husk she controlled. She now had a large muscular body, one that was trained to kill with its hands. The kuei smiled and headed back to the sake house.

The yakuza she possessed went by the name of Koichiro. He had been losing heavily at dice, and Li-Wan knew that if she went back inside and quit playing, no questions would be asked. She did so; to a chorus of disappointed voices and razzing insults, Koichiro shook his head and refused to rejoin his companions at dice.

Instead, he walked over to the sake barrel where Ruoi sat, dipping out servings of rice wine and putting them to heat over the brazier. The other yakuza were soon rolling their dice, swilling their drinks, and bantering raucously. They didn't notice Koichiro pick Ruoi up by the neck, and plunge the rat-person head first into his barrel of wine.

The evil little man struggled to get free. He changed his shape to half-rat, half man, then went all the way to rat. But the thug's grip never loosened. When he quit kicking, Koichiro got up and went out into the night.

There, the kuei released her victim, and the yakuza was once more in control of his body. Followed by the curious ghost, the



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thug rejoined his friends and tried to sit in again on the dice game, but now they had no room for him. Disappointed, he ordered another drink. Hearing no answer, he looked for Ruoi. He didn't see the man, but at the sake barrel, he found something disgusting floating in the wine.

'Ugh!' he fished a drowned rat out of the barrel and held it up. 'Hey, fellows - don't drink the sake! Look what's in it!' His companions took a look and their stomachs turned. Angrily they searched for Ruoi, to beat him up and teach him a lesson for serving spoiled sake. The yakuza never saw the little man again, and Li-Wan left, content with her revenge.

And on the next Day of Return, the little chime rang on her parent's ancestor shrine. They rejoiced, for their daughter had come home to rest at last. ☺